

# Why does not Judaism regard Jesus as the Messiah?

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## INTRODUCTION

In Christianity the person Jesus is of fundamental importance in his alleged role as the Messiah that is foretold in the Jewish scriptures. Steppa (in Zetterholm 2007:114) writes that “the justification of Christianity rested on the fulfillment of the ancient Jewish prophecies in Jesus Christ”.

In this paper I will examine the Orthodox Jewish view of Messiah and look into the reasons why Judaism has rejected the notion of Jesus Christ being the Messiah that is foretold in the Jewish scriptures.

With “Orthodox Judaism” I am referring to the Jewish tradition that relates itself to the rabbinic tradition and that regards the written tradition (the five books of Moses) and the oral tradition (Mishnah, Talmud and other rabbinic writings) as binding for Jews (Kværne and Vogt 2002).

## SOURCES

An important source will be the Jewish legalist and thinker Maimonides (1135 - 1204) and his *halachic* rulings concerning the Messiah. In the two last chapters of *Mishneh Torah* in the section *Hilchos Melachim* (“Laws of Kings”) he has specifically written about what is referred to as *Hilchos Melech HaMashiach* (“the Laws Concerning King *Mashiach*”). In these chapters Maimonides also mentions Jesus and argues why he does not fulfill the criteria for being the Messiah. Rabbi Eliyahu Touger in the introduction to *Hilchos Melachim*, specifies that,

with regard to *halachah limaaseh*, Jewish law as it is actually applied, his text does not serve as a final authority. Nevertheless, the study of the *Mishneh Torah* still has much relevance for the average Jew, for it provides him with a comprehensive overview and a basic understanding of the fundamental halachic issues involved (Touger in Maimonides 2001: 9)

This information I will elucidate using recent rabbinic commentaries coming from the Jewish Orthodox movement Chabad. Zetterholm (2007:xxiv) writes that within this movement the Messiah still remains an important figure. I will also refer to Gersom Scholem’s scholarship on the Messiah using his essay “Toward An Understanding Of The Messianic Idea In Judaism (Scholem 1995) and the book “The Messiah in Early Judaism and Christianity” (Zetterholm (ed.) 2007).

## DISPOSITION

First I will write rather briefly about the word “Messiah” and about how it is used and understood in both Judaism and Christianity. After presenting the centrality of the Messianic belief in Judaism, then I’ll clarify the distinction between the *halachic* and the *midrashic* view regarding the Messiah. This I will do in order to make the *halachic* position of Maimonides clearer and thus make an important elaboration upon the basis for the teachings which I will use in my investigation of the Jewish view of Messiah and their consequent rejection of Jesus as the Messiah.

I will then present the *halacha* concerning the Jewish view of Messiah, what qualities he must possess and what he must accomplish. As I move along I will contrast the Jewish view with the Christian view on the Messiah. Interspersed I will insert insights from the scholarly academic tradition. Towards the end I will present the main reasons why the Jewish tradition has rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Finally I will present my conclusions.

## “MESSIAH” - ABOUT THE ETYMOLOGY AND USE OF THE WORD

The word “Messiah” is an english rendering of the hebrew term *HaMashiach* (hebr.: המשיח) which literally means “anointed”. A number of different persons in the *Tanakh* are referred to as Messiah (i.e. “anointed”), usually Jewish priests and kings who has an high position in God’s service. Also the Persian ruler Cyrus is referred to as “anointed” (משיח): “Thus said the LORD to Cyrus, His anointed one” (Isaiah 45:1).

Cyrus was the ruler who allowed and enabled the Jewish exiles in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. This points towards the function of one who is a Messiah, someone who redeems the Jewish people and makes it possible for them to observe their commandments and live in their promised land.

The english word “christ” (gr.: Χριστός) is the greek word for “anointed” (i.e. “Messiah”). “Jesus Christ” thus means “Jesus Messiah”. In the Christian tradition the common noun “Messiah” is being used as a proper noun. The title of Messiah and the person Jesus merging into one person.

“Christ” being the Greek word for “Messiah” one could translate “Christianity” as “Messianity”, this would clearer bring forth how the Christian religion is based on the Jewish Messianic belief and that at the heart of its foundation is the belief that the person Jesus is the promised Messiah. A belief that Judaism strongly oppose.

## HALACHA VERSUS MIDRASH CONCERNING THE MESSIAH

The main information in the *Tanakh* dealing with the coming Messiah is written in a prophetic language and for this reason much of the information is unclear, especially concerning the exact details and chronology of events. In the *Talmud* and the *Midrashim* there are an overflow of information that is ambiguous, and there are differences of opinions among Jewish sages regarding the meaning of this information.

...the order and details of these events are not religious dogmas. Therefore a person should never occupy himself a great deal with the legendary accounts nor spend much time on the *Midrashim* dealing with these and similar matters (Scholem 1995:29).

However, among the *poskim* ("legal scholars") dealing with *halacha* there are no differences of opinions regarding what are the major events that will take place leading up to the Messianic era and what qualities the Messiah must possess and what he has to accomplish in order to be regarded as the foretold Messiah.

Practical, legal rulings are found and authenticated only in the works of *Poskim*, and not in Midrashic or Talmudic sources. And *Rambam*<sup>1</sup> is the classical authoritative Codifier, especially in the area of *Moshiach* (Stone 1991:22).

My focus will thus be on the *halachic* aspect concerning the Messiah.

## ORTHODOX JUDAISM AND MESSIANIC BELIEF

It is important for Maimonides to demonstrate that the Messianic belief has a clear and indisputable source in the Pentateuch itself. The Torah sources that Maimonides (2001:610, 612) draws forth from the outset in *Laws of King 11:1*, is Deuteronomy 30:3-5, "*God will bring back your captivity and have mercy upon you. He will again gather you [from among the nations]. ... Even if your Diaspora is at the ends of the heavens, [God will gather you up from there]... and bring you [to the land].*"; Numbers 24:17-18, "*A star shall go forth from Jacob, and a staff shall arise in Israel. ... Edom will be demolished and Seir will be destroyed*"; and Deuteronomy 19:8-9, "*When God will expand your borders... you must add three more cities*".

Maimonides specifies that since this last command has never been fulfilled, God will surely fulfill it in the future, since "God did not give this command in vain".

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<sup>1</sup> Rambam is the acronym for Maimonides. **Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon** (RaMBaM). Maimonides is the Greek rendering of the name Maimon.

Maimonides (ibid.: 612) sees no need to cite proofs from the works of the prophets since all their books are filled with messianic prophecies<sup>2</sup>.

Maimonides regards the belief in the coming of Messiah and the Messianic redemption as one of the fundamental principles of the Jewish faith. In the introduction to chapter 10 his commentary to the *Mishna* he writes, "The twelfth principle is the belief in the coming of the Messiah who, in common with all the kings of Israel, will be a descendant of King David through his son Solomon" (quoted in Scherman and Zlotowitz 2001: 171).

Rabbi Immanuel Schochet brings forth that some Torah authorities view this principle as an integral part of the first of the Ten commandments,

...just as we must believe that God took us out of Egypt, as it is written, "I am G-d, your G-d, who has taken you out from the land of Egypt".. so I want that you believe that I am G-d, your G-d, who will yet gather you and save you (Schochet 1992:18).

The entry "Messiah" in the Jewish Encyclopedia writes: "the idea of a personal Messiah runs through the Old Testament. It is the natural outcome of the future hope" (Buttenwieser in Singer 1925).

The Messiah as the leader of the Jewish people will thus be instrumental in order to save the Jewish people. Collins (in Zetterholm 2007: 19) concludes that even though the Jewish messianic expectation never was uniform in the pre-Christian time, "the hope for the restoration of Davidic kingship was standard."

## THE MESSIAH IS A JEWISH MONARCH

It is significant that Maimonides places the laws concerning the Messiah in the final section of the *Mishneh Torah* in the last two chapters of the laws dealing with the laws of kings (*Hilchos Melachim*). In line with Jewish Orthodox belief, this highlights that the Messiah will be the ultimate Jewish king. As a king he has to fulfill specific functions which follows being a king, namely,

...to uphold the laws of the Torah and create a society centered around these laws. In this manner, he will create a culture that reflects God's desire for humanity. The consummate expression of a monarch's execution of this function - and thus the ultimate expression of God's intent - will be realized by *Mashiach*. (Touger in Maimonides 2001:8)

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<sup>2</sup> See these generally accepted prophecies regarding the Messiah - Isaiah 2, 11, 42; 59:20; Jeremiah 23, 30, 33; 48:47; 49:39; Ezekiel 38:16; Hosea 3:4-3:5; Micah 4; Zephaniah 3:9; Zechariah 14:9; Daniel 10:14

Maimonides (ibid.: 608) writes in *Laws of Kings* 11:1 “In the future, the King *Mashiach* will arise and renew the Davidic dynasty, restoring it to its initial sovereignty”. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson (1992: 34) states that “this implies that by restoring the Jewish monarchy, the *Mashiach* will make possible the complete observance of the Torah and its mitzvos.”

Maimonides continues,

He will rebuild the [Beis Ha]Mikdash and gather in the dispersed remnant of Israel. Then, in his days, all the statutes will be reinstituted as in former times. We will offer sacrifices and observe the Sabbatical and Jubilee years according to all their particulars set forth in the Torah (2001: 608).

Schneerson (1992: 35) comments that Maimonides thus defines Messiah as,

a king, who will not only redeem the Jews from exile, but also restore the observance of the Torah and the *mitzvos* to its complete state. And that all the elements of Torah observance which were lacking in exile - because the entire Jewish people did not live in *Eretz Yisrael* and because the *Beis HaMikdash* was destroyed - will be renewed.

Gersom Scholem, using the same rabbinic sources as Maimonides, also brings forth that in the Messianic age a totally new level of Torah-observance will be reached. “For at that time a great deal would become capable of fulfillment for the first time which under the conditions of the exile ... was not at all realizable” (Scholem 1995: 20).

## CAN THE REAL MESSIAH PLEASE STAND UP?

In order to determine who will be the Messiah that “will arise in the future”, there exists within Jewish *halacha* a set of criteria that has to be fulfilled. The Messiah must possess some specific qualities and he must accomplish certain defined tasks. A number of different persons in every generation can thus be likely candidates for the position of being the Messiah.

Any time is a potential time for the coming of Mashiach. This does not mean, however, that at the appropriate time he will suddenly emerge from Heaven to appear on earth. On the contrary: Mashiach is already on earth, a human being of great saintly status (a *tzadik*) appearing and existing in every generation. “In every generation is born a progeny of Judah fit to be Israel’s Mashiach!” (Schochet 1992: 38-39).

Up through the ages there has been several times when prominent rabbis have declared someone to be the Messiah, but where they later have been forced to reject their

declaration, because it has become clear that the person did not fulfill the job-description, so to speak.

Rabbi Akiva, one of the greater Sages of the Mishnah, was one of the supporters of King Bar Kozibah and would describe him as the Messianic king. He and all the Sages of his generation considered him to be the Messianic king until he was killed because of sins. Once he was killed, they realized that he was not [the Mashiach.] The Sages did not ask him for any signs or wonders” *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 11:3* (Maimonides 2001: 612).

Christianity lays emphasis on the alleged miracles that surrounds Jesus, his birth, his deeds and his death, and these miracles are used as important proofs that he is the Messiah. In Judaism miracles are useless as proofs, what matters is if the Messiah accomplishes what he is supposed to accomplish.

## THE MESSIAH’S JOB-DESCRIPTION

Maimonides presents the qualities the Messiah must possess, the tasks he must accomplish and the situation that will be generated once all requirements has been fulfilled.

If a king will arise from the House of David who diligently contemplates the Torah and observes its mitzvot as prescribed by the Written Law and the Oral Law as David, his ancestor, compels all of Israel to walk in [the way of the Torah] and rectify the breaches [in its observance], and fights the wars of God, we may, with assurance, consider him Mashiach. *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 11:4* (Maimonides 2001: 614).

Fulfillment of the above requirements makes him a liable candidate for the position as Messiah. Maimonides continues with further requirements that has to be fulfilled in order for the Jewish tradition to be absolute sure without any uncertainty that the candidate is the right man.

If he succeeds in the above, builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is definitely the Mashiach (ibid.: 614).

This will then naturally generate a situation where the Divine presence will be manifest and all the nations of the world will be united in their service of God.

He will then improve the entire world, [motivating] all the nations to serve God together as [Tzeplaniah 3:9] states: “I will transform the peoples to a purer language so that they all will call upon the name of God and serve Him with one purpose (ibid.: 614).



## THE LEGAL CRITERIA:

We can thus make the following list of the criteria that must be fulfilled in order for someone to unanimously be declared the Messiah by Orthodox Judaism:

- 1) King from the House of David.
- 2) Torah scholar.
- 3) Torah leader.
- 4) Must fight the wars of God (secure and enlarge the national borders).
- 5) Build the Temple.
- 6) Gather in the dispersed Jews.
- 7) Improvement of the entire world (the Messianic era).

## WAS JESUS CHRIST?

Christianity's teaching of Messiah's Second Coming does not apply to Judaism.

Maimonides (ibid.: 614) writes that, "If he did not succeed to this degree or was killed, he surely is not [the redeemer] promised by the Torah".

He then continues demonstrating that "Jesus of Nazareth who aspired to be the Mashiach" is far from fulfilling the criteria, quite the contrary.

Can there be a greater stumbling block than [Christianity]? All the prophets spoke of Mashiach as the redeemer of Israel and their savior who would gather their dispersed and strengthen their [observance of] the mitzvot. [In contrast, Christianity] caused the Jews to be slain by the sword, their remnants to be scattered and humbled, the Torah to be altered, and the majority of the world to err and serve a god other than the Lord (ibid.: 614, 616).

Also among non-Jews there were individuals who argued against the Christians, sharing some of the Jewish arguments against Jesus being the Messiah. Steppa writes that, "the pagan Celsus, criticizing the Christians for claiming as the Messiah a person who lacked the most important messianic quality, namely that of kingship" (in Zetterholm 2007: 115).

Steppa continues by stating that the Church Father Origen's reply to Celsus marks a shift within early Christianity, away from chiliasm and towards an independent Christian interpretation of the Messiah,

[Origen's reply in *Contra Celsum*] demonstrates an evident shift in the reception of messianism in early Christianity. Instead of reflecting upon the messianic proof texts from the Old Testament in terms of the traditional Jewish imagery of messianic kingship, the principal interest is now turned to Christ as the eternal and preexistent Word. Through his

transformation of messianism into Christology, Origen contributes in setting the scene for the trinitarian and Christological reflection in the fourth and fifth centuries (ibid.: 115).

That Jesus of Nazareth was not the promised Messiah seems also to be acknowledged by the earliest followers of Jesus who were themselves Jews. The earliest Christianity was thus a sect within Judaism. Most of these Jews gradually abandoned the emerging Jesus movement, and the movement was eventually taken over by non-Jews who established the religion we today know as Christianity<sup>3</sup>.

Maimonides does on the other hand recognize that Jesus of Nazareth is an important component in the Grand Masterplan. Christianity (and Islam) will serve to prepare the way for Messiah and the improvement of the entire world,

How will this come about? The entire world has already become filled with the mention of Mashiach, Torah, and mitzvot. These matters have been spread to the furthestmost islands to many stubborn-hearted nations. *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings* 11:4 (Maimonides 2001: 616).

When the real Messiah comes the world will readily acknowledge their own mistaken beliefs and recognize the Jewish Messiah, this will only come about through the world having already become familiar with the concept of Messiah.

## CONCLUSION

The Messianic era will, according to Orthodox Judaism, be an era where all the inhabitants of the world will readily recognize the existence of God - "the world will be full of the knowledge of God"<sup>4</sup> - and that the Jewish tradition contains God's true revelation and the will for mankind. The Temple in Jerusalem will be "a house of prayer for all the nations"<sup>5</sup>.

The occupation of the entire world will be solely to know God. Therefore, the Jews will be great sages and know the hidden matters, grasping the knowledge of their Creator according to [the full extent] of human potential. *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings* 12:5 (Maimonides 2001: 624)

The Jews will be "the light of the nations", "nations shall walk by your light, Kings by your shining radiance"<sup>6</sup>. "In those days, ten men from nations of every tongue will take hold of

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<sup>3</sup> Lynch 2010: 43-44

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 11:9

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 56:7

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 60:3

every Jew by a corner of his cloak and say, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."<sup>7</sup>

This situation where all of the nations are united in their service of God, will create a world without theft, without murder, without envy and war. "In that era, there will be neither famine or war, envy or competition for good will flow in abundance and all the delights will be freely available as dust" (ibid.: 622).

The Messianic era will be the natural result from all of the laws of the Torah being observed and the Messianic king is instrumental in bringing about a situation where this is possible. The Jewish Messiah will bring this about through being both a great political leader and a great Torah scholar. His political skills will enable the restoration of a united Davidic kingdom, rebuilding of the Temple and ingathering of the exiles. He will secure the national borders and enable its inhabitants to be free to devote themselves to their religion. His skills as a Torah scholar will teach and inspire the Jews to observe all the commandments in the Torah.

Our sages taught: "There will be no difference between the current age and the Messianic era except [the emancipation] from our subjugation of the [gentile] kingdoms." *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings* 12:2 (ibid.: 618).

The Christian Messiah replaces observance of the law with faith in the Messiah (i.e. Jesus) himself.

The name "Jesus" signifies that the very name of God is present in the person of his Son, made man for the universal and definitive redemption from sins. It is the divine name that alone brings salvation, and henceforth all can invoke his name, for Jesus united himself to all men through his Incarnation, so that "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." *catechism* 432 (Pope John Paul II: 1997).

The Christian religion have changed the concept of Messiah from being a means to an end into being an end in itself. Instead of observing the Torah and thereby creating Heaven on earth, so to speak, belief in the Christian Messiah will bring you into Heaven. In Judaism the question of whether Jesus is the Messiah is something that can be legally decided. In Christianity the question is dependent upon faith and personal belief.

This focus away from observance of the Torah and away from legal arguments is antithetical to the Jewish Orthodox concept of the Messiah. From the Jewish Orthodox perspective there is absolutely no doubt that Jesus was not the promised Messiah, simply because he did not fulfill the *halachic* criteria which are based on the Jewish proof-texts.

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<sup>7</sup> Zechariah 8:23

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